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SUBJECT: CONSULATE DHAHNAN HOLDS FIRST EVER MEETING WITH
TOP SHIRAZI CLERIC HASSAN AL-SAFFAR

REF: 05 RIYADH 07522

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On February 9, Consulate Dhahran officers held our first ever meeting with Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar, the paramount religious figure in the Saudi Arabian "Shirazi" movement. For more than a decade, al-Saffar has consistently rebuffed Consulate requests to meet stating that "the time was not right" or "no benefit would come from such a meeting." The meeting came at a condolence call on the occasion of the passing of Shaykh Hasan's father, Hajj Mousa. Members of al-Saffar's circle expressed appreciation for the call and were surprisingly open to the idea of future interaction with the Consulate. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On February 9, the CG and Consulate officers paid a condolence call on Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar, the paramount religious figure in Saudi Arabia's "Shirazi" movement, on the death of his father, Hajj Mousa. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first ever time that Consulate officers have had an opportunity to meet and interact with the man many consider Saudi Arabia's most important Shi'a figure. For more than decade, Consulate officers have sought meetings with al-Saffar only to be rebuffed that "the time is not right." In 2005, al-Saffar's office inquired about the possibility of the shaykh obtaining a visa to travel to Detroit to address American Muslim congregations on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. Al-Saffar's office requested the visa only two weeks prior to the Eid. As Dhahran was not then open for visa services, we told al-Saffar's office that he was welcome to apply in Riyadh if he wished, but that the Consulate had serious doubts that a visa would be issued in time for the shaykh to travel. We suggested that if he wished to pursue an NIV application, we should arrange a meeting to discuss the issue. A reply came back that "no benefit would come from such a meeting for either side."

¶3. (C) Consulate officers have speculated for years that the reason for al-Saffar's unwillingness to meet were instructions from the Saudi Ministry of Interior General Intelligence (Mabahith) that al-Saffar refrain from interactions with foreign diplomats. Prior to making the condolence call, Consulate officials inquired through intermediaries if we would be welcome. Twenty-four hours later, the reply came back in the affirmative. The Consulate's Political FSN speculates that al-Saffar's group checked with the Mabahith who evidently posed no objections.

¶4. (C) The CG spent about twenty minutes chatting with al-Saffar in Arabic. Hajj Mousa died at the age of 84 after suffering from a bad heart. Al-Saffar has a son studying in Iowa, but could not remember the name of the university. ("Iowa is a very small place, do they have more than one university?") Discussion amongst the family determined that the son, Mohammed, was at the University of Northern Iowa. Al-Saffar was interested in, and well-briefed on, the visa

issuing status of the U.S. Embassy and both consulates in the Kingdom. He confirmed a story (reftel) that Minister of Information Iyad al-Madani had invited him to deliver a sermon ("khutba") during Eid on Saudi TV in 2005. The khutba was taped, but the airing of the interview was cancelled after what al-Saffar described as "a strong reaction from the shaykhs." Al-Saffar commented that King Abdullah genuinely wants reform and more religious toleration, but is constrained by a powerful religious community. Al-Saffar expressed an interest in obtaining a U.S. visa some day saying he wished to visit his son in Iowa and noting that there were "tens of thousands" of Saudi students in the U.S. whom he wished to visit and offer spiritual sustenance.

15. (C) COMMENT. Perhaps more important than the relatively banal chit-chat exchanged at the gathering was a surprising openness among many attendees, including al-Saffar's younger brother Shaykh Mohammad, who stated they wished future meetings and greater interaction with the Consulate. Conoffs plan to follow up to see if we are able to forge closer links to al-Saffar and members of his circle in the hopes of improving USG understanding of al-Saffar's "Shirazi" movement and its key players. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER